







For women's rights, peace and security

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

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**Extremist groups manipulate religious narratives to emphasize women's subordination to men in order to exclude women from the public and political sphere, with far-reaching negative consequences for sustainable peace.** In Libya, the erasure of women from the political arena has thwarted the country's transition to an inclusive, peaceful, and democratic state.
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**Online violence, harassment and abuse limit women's ability to participate in public and political life by confining them to private and women-only fora, disrupting their political campaigns, and obstructing their organizing and activism.** Online incitement campaigns perpetuate extremist narratives; these are commonly used to silence and discredit women, including through sexual defamation.
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**Understanding the specific leverage points used by extremist groups enables countering violent extremism (CVE) interventions to be more strategic in targeting their alternative narratives.** In the Libyan context, where extremist narratives seek to undermine women's political participation, alternative narratives that draw on the Qur'an to promote the roles of women in peacebuilding and conflict resolution are particularly effective.
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**Peacebuilding and CVE interventions should strengthen the legal safety net for women and women peacebuilders and take care not to reinforce paternalistic protection narratives.** Impunity for violence against women enables extremist actors to position women as vulnerable, justify containing them to the domestic sphere, and expose women to increased insecurity under the guise of protection.
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**The process of developing alternative narratives is of equal importance to the content of the narratives in order to ensure ownership, sustainability, and dissemination across different sectors of society.** This can be achieved by including religious scholars in the conceptualization of narratives, engaging in a deliberate validation process, and initiating a media campaign to reach a wide audience.
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**Creating and maintaining alliances, networks, and spaces for trusted local actors to collaborate on shared advocacy and activism is key to amplifying peaceful discourse and ensuring its sustainability.** Alliances build empowerment, unity, and partnership – all necessary ingredients to keep alternative narratives alive in social consciousness.

## CONTEXT ANALYSIS

### From Hope to Exclusion: Gendered Narratives as Tools for Women's Disempowerment

Following the 2011 revolution, the proliferation of gendered extremist narratives directly undermined Libyan women's ability to reform post-war political institutions and build a more inclusive, equal, and peaceful state. The reversal of limitations on polygamy in 2011 constituted a warning sign for a broader conservative shift in Libya's cultural discourse, accompanied by constraints on women's rights. Militant groups popularized regressive narratives, justified by ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam, that framed women as weak, futile, subordinate to men, and belonging in the domestic sphere.<sup>3</sup> These narratives underpin their advocacy for conservative Shariah-based family law, gender segregation and guardianship laws.<sup>4</sup>

In the aftermath of the revolution, extremist gendered narratives justified barring women from participating



Libyan women played a pivotal role in the 2011 uprising - also referred to as the February 17 revolution - yet their voices were rapidly silenced in its aftermath.

3. Johnston, M. et al (2019). Gender Equality and Violent Extremism: A Research Agenda for Libya. ([access here](#)).

4. International Crisis Group (2019). Addressing the Rise of Libya's Madkhali-Salafis. ([access here](#)).

in drafting a new constitution, depriving them of the opportunity to enshrine gender equality in Libyan law.<sup>5</sup> Over the following decade, Libyan women were never meaningfully included in national politics. When women have been able to participate, such as when the Government of National Unity (GNU) elected five women ministers to its government in June 2021, they have not been able to act on their revolutionary vision for equality. Many of the laws implemented under Libya's rival governments continue to restrict women's civil liberties, participation in politics, bodily autonomy, and economic status.<sup>6</sup>

In addition to confining women's legal and political rights, militant groups and their supporters have used gendered extremist narratives both online and offline to silence female politicians, peacebuilders, human rights defenders, journalists, and activists, targeting them with threats, online abuse and smear campaigns that leverage gender stereotypes in order to damage their credibility and force them to retract from the public sphere.<sup>7</sup> The extremist hate speech and images used to target them are highly gendered in nature, including accusations of immorality and dishonor.<sup>8</sup> Online abuse carries the threat of real-life violence in Libya: women with a prominent political and public presence have been beaten, abducted, tortured, and assassinated.<sup>9</sup>

## The Vicious Cycle of Protection Narratives

In a vicious cycle, the absence of Libyan women's legal and political rights is used to create narratives that frame women as vulnerable and in need of protection, further justifying gender discrimination and women's exclusion from the public sphere. Extremist actors have cited the lack of legal accountability for sexual violence as a reason to keep women inside the domestic sphere where it is "safer."<sup>10</sup> Due to fear of sexual violence encountered on the way to school, parents curtail girls' education and restrict their

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movement.<sup>11</sup> To further protect girls from insecurity, parents may be more likely to enter them into child marriage.<sup>12 13</sup> Some Libyan women have chosen to support extremist actors in exchange for protection by affiliated militias, armed groups, or tribal structures.<sup>14</sup> Such "protection bargains" often result in increased or renewed insecurities for women.<sup>15 16</sup>

## Tribal Identity as a Source of Resilience

Notably, members of matrilineal tribes in Libya's southwest have demonstrated significant resilience and resistance to recruitment by violent extremist actors and their narratives. Among the Toubou and Tuareq, two semi-nomadic tribes active across North and Central Africa, cultural gender norms are flexible, men are generally supportive of women's participation in national politics, and masculinities are less identified with dominance and aggression and more with social connectivity to the community.<sup>17</sup> In contrast to the conservative gendered narratives promoted by extremist organizations, Tuareq boys and girls are raised together, education for girls is prioritized, and women can freely choose their husbands.<sup>18</sup> Gender norms play a role in tribal resilience to recruitment, with rigid gender norms negatively correlated with resistance to recruitment.

## Libyan Women Forum: Advocating for Women's Political Participation through Peaceful Islamic Narratives

In November 2011, following the mobilization of Libyan civil society during the revolution, a group of women from diverse age groups and segments of society established the Libyan Women Forum (LWF) with the aim to empower women to participate in reconstruction, phase and national decision-making processes.<sup>19</sup> Although their initial work focused on advocating for women's participation using the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) framework, they soon recognized the importance of anchoring their work in Islamic scholarship. In 2015, in direct response to the increased extremist and misogynistic religious discourse in Libya, LWF began the development of the Islamic Peace Tool (IPT).<sup>20</sup> Published in 2016, the IPT is a guidebook that draws on peaceful, pluralistic interpretations of Islamic to support female inclusion in peacebuilding, politics, policy-making, and CVE, as well as build resilience against narrow and exclusionary extremist thinking more broadly.

5. Human Rights Watch (2013). A Revolution for All. Women's Rights in the New Libya. ([access here](#)).  
6. The Borgen Project (2020). Room to Advance Women's Rights in Libya. ([access here](#)).  
7. Lawyers for Justice in Libya (2021). We Will Not be Silenced: Online Violence Against Women in Libya. ([access here](#)).  
8. Ibid.  
9. Amnesty International (2018). Silenced Voices: Libyan Women Human Rights Defenders Under Attack. ([access here](#)).  
10. International Civil Society Action Network (2013). From Subjects to Citizens: Women in Post Revolutionary Libya. ([access here](#)).  
11. Bearat, H. (Working paper). Early Marriages in Middle East and North Africa. ([access here](#)).  
12. Ibid.  
13. Cordaid (2018). Women's rights in Libya. "We have stamina. Because our struggle is our Life." ([access here](#)).

14. Johnston, M. et al (2019). Gender Equality and Violent Extremism: A Research Agenda for Libya. ([access here](#)).  
15. Donovan, O. (2021). Trading Freedoms for Protection: Gender and Localised Protection in Libya. ([access here](#)).  
16. Donovan, O. (2021). Gendered impacts of the localised protection of civilians: insights from Libya. ([access here](#)).  
17. USIP (2017). Matriarchal and Tribal Identity, Community Resilience, and Vulnerability in South Libya. ([access here](#)).  
18. Ibid.  
19. Euro-Mediterranean Women's Foundation (2016). Libyan Women Forum profile ([access here](#)).  
20. LWF internal documents, accessed February 18, 2022





LWF initiated a media campaign that prompted public discussions on the ongoing conflict in Libya and its effects on communities and on the role of women in promoting peace.

## Islamic Peace Tool: Alternative Narratives to Foster Acceptance for Women's Participation

To develop the IPT, LWF worked with a well-respected Libyan Islamic scholar who participated in workshops and trainings to provide readings of UNSCR 1325 and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) grounded in Islamic values<sup>21</sup>. The idea was to develop peaceful messages based on examples from Islamic texts and traditions that urge tolerance, social cohesion, equality between women and men, peaceful coexistence between communities, and emphasize the individual's responsibility to help ensure peace and harmony.<sup>22</sup> In the words of a Libyan female spiritual guide (locally referred to as Morsheda), "Terrorism has no religious affiliation. Islam as any other divine religion calls for peace and renounces violence and terrorism." The workshops provided the blueprint for the IPT.

In 2016, as part of the validation process of the IPT, LWF leadership decided to bring together scholars from religious schools in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, and Morocco

with Libyan women activists in a series of discussions. The scholars presented on the importance of promoting moderate interpretations of the Qur'an and Islamic law to counter increasingly radical religious discourse across the region and support women's roles in promoting social cohesion and peace.<sup>23</sup> They offered examples from the recorded life of the Prophet Muhammad and from Islamic history that challenge extremist discourse, gender misconceptions and stereotypes.

## Deliberate Dissemination

To disseminate the IPT and encourage local organizations to develop and implement their own activities to challenge extremist discourse, LWF carried out awareness-raising sessions targeting primarily activists, teachers, civil servants, housewives and female spiritual guides (Morsheda).<sup>24</sup> To reach larger segments of the population, LWF also initiated a media campaign that prompted public discussions on the ongoing conflict in Libya and on the role of women in promoting peace. Building on these initial strategies, LWF conceived of "Peace Circles" as a mechanism to coordinate peacebuilders to advocate for women's participation in politics, peacebuilding, and CVE. By creating alliances throughout Libya, LWF has been able to sustain dissemination of the IPT's alternative narratives and integrate them in peacebuilding work. As noted by a regional Peace Circle coordinator: "I see the Peace Circles network as the start of a movement for [Libyan] women to unite and coordinate their efforts and amplify their voices for the mutual benefit of our nation. Women can contest the stereotype for being the weaker link. I believe all women, as they are strong, can be the champions for peace in Libya."

**"Terrorism has no religious affiliation. Islam as any other divine religion calls for peace and renounces violence and terrorism."**

**- Libyan female spiritual guide**

21. Interview with Shahrazad Magrabi, January 2022

22. LWF internal documents, accessed February 18, 2022

23. Interview with Shahrazad Magrabi, January 2022

24. Libyan Women Forum (2019). Taking the Lead: Promoting Peace, Pluralism, and Inclusion. LWF final project report to ICAN (internal document).